

REV. FLORENCE CONOVER

Narrator

KIM HEIKKILA

Interviewer

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Saint Paul, Minnesota



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TRANSCRIPT—REV. FLORENCE CONOVER

Interviewee: Florence Conover
 Interviewer: Kim Heikkila
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Kim Heikkila: This is an interview for the Oxford Community Center Oral History Project. It is Wednesday, December 10, 2025, and I'm here with Reverend Florence Conover. My name is Kim Heikkila. Today I'll be talking to Florence about her involvement at Oxford, both her involvement, and her kids, and perhaps even grandkids. So thank you so much for being willing to sit down and talk to me about your own Oxford experiences.

Florence Conover: You're welcome.

KH: So just to start, let's just start by getting to know a little bit about you, like when and where were you born?

FC: I was born in Duluth, Minnesota at the St. Mary's Hospital. Lived in Duluth until, I guess I was about 12—I'm sorry, four. We moved to Superior, Wisconsin for about a year. We had a restaurant in Superior, my parents did. Then we moved back over into Duluth, lived with my Aunt Mary and her family, and she's now deceased. When we stayed there, I guess I was about four when I transferred to St. Paul. My parents, my mom was in St. Paul. My dad worked on the railroad, Northern Pacific Railroad and so we traveled back and forth on the train a lot. So I was about four when we actually moved to Minnesota. I grew up at 430 Carroll in St. Paul.

[00:02:00]

KH: And so, you moved to St. Paul when you were about four?

FC: Four-ish, because I wasn't in kindergarten yet.

KH: So you went to all your schooling here?

FC: I went to all my schooling in St. Paul.

KH: In the Rondo neighborhood?

FC: Right, McKinley. McKinley and Marshall. And Marshall to Mechanic Arts.

KH: And what year did you graduate high school?

FC: June 6, 1960, at 6:00, 666. Good thing I'm not superstitious. [Laughs.]

KH: Do you remember much from those first four years up in northern Minnesota?

FC: Yeah, I know when I moved to Minnesota, my sister was a year ahead of me. So she was in the fifth or sixth grade and she brought me a gingerbread boy home from school. I was so excited and I was dancing in the kitchen with it, and it caught fire and the fire caught my hair and burned all my hair off my head. They had to rush me down to the old [Ramsey] Ancker Hospital then. I still have the scar from burning all my hair off my head. After that, I just kind of remember going to school and me and my sister fighting our way home from school every day from Maxwell because of jealousy, because we had really good hair. They used to pull our hair.

KH: Other kids did?

[00:04:00]

FC: The kids at Maxwell, yeah. They'd chase us home and pull our hair. We lived right there at the Arundel Hill. We lived at 388 Carroll. We lived at 430 Carroll. And between those two schools, they used to chase us home. Beat us up, chase us home.

KH: Oh yikes.

FC: Yeah. We had to grow up tough, so we had to go down the playground to get tough.

KH: Was it just you and your sister?

FC: Me and my sister.

KH: No other kids?

FC: I had a brother. I had an older brother. And so, he protected us, and he would take up for us when they chased us home from school. Right all the way to high school. We went all the way up to high school and we'd walk down to Mechanic Arts.

KH: And where was Mechanic Arts?

FC: Mechanic Arts was right next door to the state capitol. It's now the law library. That was my high school I grew up in and graduated from.

KH: And how much older than you is your brother?

FC: My brother is now 86. And I'm 83. So three years.

KH: And again, maybe you were so young that there isn't a distinct impression about this, but do you remember feeling anything different about the Rondo community compared to where you were in Duluth or Superior?

FC: No, I was too young. I was just a kid having fun and enjoying life. Race and color didn't mean anything to me. I grew up in a white church. When I was in Superior, I went to a little white church. A lady paid us 25 cents to go to church. That's where I got initiated into the Lord and church. After we got out of church, we'd go run to her house. She was from Germany and she didn't go, but she would get the kids in the neighborhood to go. We looked forward to that 25 cents, but it paid off.

[00:06:00]

KH: So she paid you to go, but she didn't go?

FC: She didn't go, but she would give us, "When you get home from church, you come in, and I've got something for you." She had little wood, homemade wood German people, and tables, and everything, whatever they made in Germany. I don't know,

somebody had to send them to her. She would give us a piece of that, a little piece of one of her toys and our 25 cents.

KH: So she obviously knew that there was some value from you kids to go to church, even if she didn't go.

FC: Oh yes, even if she didn't. Yeah. And we never really thought about, well, why don't you go? We just needed our 25 cents.

KH: Yeah, I mean, 25 cents bought a lot in that day.

FC: Yeah. So I grew up not giving kids money, but bringing and taking children to church, Mount Olivet. When I was able to drive and stuff, I would take the kids in my congregation to church. Nobody got paid because I didn't believe in that after I got older, but it worked for me.

KH: So at what point do you think you realized the inherent value of going to church versus, Hey, I would get a quarter for this?

[00:08:00]

FC: I would say when I was around 12, because I was in part of, it was called the Minnesota Gospel Choral Union. I was a part of that at 12. Two of my village mothers took me to that rehearsal all the time as I was growing up. I thought when I joined my church, which was Mount Olivet Baptist Church, that that was the Gospel Choral Union that I was joining, but it was the Mount Olivet Baptist Church. But they instilled my religious beliefs through that because it was a Christian organization. Professor Thomas Dorsey, a very well renowned singer of the United States in gospel music, was the leader of that organization and we met every year.

KH: He was the leader of the choir? Or the chorus?

FC: People came from all over the United States to be a part of this Gospel Choral Union. I didn't realize then when I was growing up what a big shot, what a personality he

was. He wrote “Precious Lord, Take My Hand,” the composer of that. He was our choir director whenever I went out of town. My two foster mothers seen to it, so I had a great religious upbringing around older people, too. So that was a great experience for me growing up and I tried to give it to all the young people in my church that were growing up.

[00:10:00]

FC: My husband and I took them to that same convention that I was a part of as a young person. And that was a rich reward for them, too, because they remember to this day getting in our church in our van, driving to the national convention.

KH: Now, did your brother and sister, your parents, were part of this?

FC: My mom was not. My sister was not. She was off doing her own thing. My brother was off doing his own thing, getting in trouble and my sister, also. So I was kind of like the loner as far as the church thing.

KH: So, it wasn’t a family tradition.

FC: It wasn’t a family thing. It was me and my village moms that saw that I needed that and raised me up in that. My mom wasn’t able to. Not that she couldn’t, she was not able because of the kind of father I had, you know?

KH: Was your dad around when you were down here?

FC: I had two. I had a dad and a stepdad. I didn’t grow up with my dad. I grew up with a stepfather. But he was a very jealous person, and he did not allow my mom to go anywhere. So the people at the church would come and get me and bring me to church. And that’s Mr. Harry Ballard. And you probably interviewed Gaynell Clarity Ray. Have you interviewed Gaynell Ray?

KH: No.

FC: I thought somebody told me she was one of those that were interviewed. But

her father is the one that helped raise me up in the church. He was like a pillar in the church. So I grew up with all his children, and we all became church brothers and sisters at Mount Olivet, the Village.

[00:12:00]

FC: And at Mount Olivet, at the Ober Boys Club and at Oxford. We all hung out at the Ober Boys Club. We went to camp there for a dollar every year. One dollar. Harold Moore and Ona [ph] were the directors. Then when we grew up, we got bigger, we started going down to Oxford, and that's when Bill came into play. And Bill was our director. Of course, he loved kids, so he wrapped his arm around all the Black community. Yeah, he should have been Black. I mean, oh, Bill. He was always there for us.

KH: I have heard that from everybody.

FC: Always there for us. Yeah.

KH: What do you think it is about him as a white guy that allowed him to become part of the community in that way?

FC: I don't know. I don't know if he came from any heritage. That would be a good history to find out from Bill what history he came from, that he ended up in our community as a playground director. He stayed there until they replaced him, which was for years and we were mad when they replaced him. They said, "No, he needed to stay." But that was the City of St. Paul, so, you know? He treated us all with respect and dignity and we didn't see favoritism in Bill. Everybody loved Bill. Everybody loved Bill. To this day when we see him, I see him more than anybody, and when we see him, and he remembers us, but he's kind of got Alzheimer's now, but yeah, we always reacquaint back and he starts memorizing back to them good old days.

[00:14:00]

FC: But yeah, he's still the same old Bill. He works over there at the Black church,

so he's never left the community. When he remarried, he remarried one of the members of the community. So it's been in his blood.

KH: It sure has.

FC: All his life. Yeah.

KH: Yeah, that's amazing.

FC: I don't even know any of Bill's kids, his first family. Yeah, I don't know any of them. I think it's big. But yeah.

KH: So, tell me, you've been talking about growing up in Rondo through your involvement at the church and the village mothers who kind of got you involved there. But say a little bit more just about Rondo at the time that you were growing up. What was that neighborhood or the community like?

FC: We weren't allowed to really go a lot out into the community. My stepfather, shall I call him, was very protective of us. There wasn't a lot of crime, so I don't know why he protected us so, but he was very protective of us. So our big thing in the community was going down the Oxford Hill, tobogganing and running into cars, and sleighing in the community, ice skating wherever we could find a piece of ice, which was usually up at the Ober Boys Club. I just lived two blocks from the Ober Boys Club, and so we could walk. We walked down there for our activities and that's where we hung out and that's where we played basketball and did our Halloween time and our camp time and that's where all the kids hung out.

[00:16:00]

FC: There was a bar right across the street which ended up to be my, how should I say it? My stepmother's dad's bar. It was really interesting. We never really went in there, but it ended up a family type of thing. But we were protected away from that area. But, you know, across the street from each other. So then I started from there down to what we

had was the name of the playground—

KH: The Hollow.

FC: Hollow. The Hollow playground. Yeah. And so, we went down there and we did a lot of ice skating down there because it was in a low gully and they kept it for us to use. Then the Elks band, that was a marching band, that's where they did all their practicing and playing down there in the Hollow. So the whole neighborhood, when they heard them drums, everybody congregated to the Hollow playground to listen to the music. Then when they would come out in the street, I was one of those kids that loved music and I'd follow the girls that were majorettes, and I'd march alongside of them, and they'd say, "Get out of here. Leave us alone. We're marching. We're marching." "I don't care. I want to learn what you're doing, too. I want to do what you're doing." So, I always stayed close to them. As I grew up and got to know a few of them, I used to tease them about, "You remember that little girl that used to run alongside you when you were marching? That was me, the one that you were chasing away." But it didn't help because I grew up with the rhythm and the music in me, and I've used it all my life.

[00:18:00]

KH: Well, and you were talking about the Gospel Choral Union.

FC: Yeah, as a little girl singing "Jesus loves me, this I know," when I was tongue tied in Sunday school. So I've been in music in some kind of way all my life. All my life. And nobody in my family was musical. Nobody.

KH: And if you had to explain, why music? What does it do for you? What is it?

FC: It makes me feel alive. It makes me feel good inside. It enriches me, something that I have in me that nobody else has. It's my own. I can call it my own. When I was little, I was always kind of being pushed around, and they took my money and stuff.

KH: Pulling your hair.

FC: Yeah, pull my hair. Everything was against me. So when I got that music in me, nobody could take that. It just grew up in me, and my village moms, they'd seen that in me. And so, they made sure that I stayed in church, that I got connected to that Gospel Choral Union so that I could move on with my music. Like my one foster mom, she said, "I'd seen so much in you as you were growing up."

[00:20:00]

FC: I found a letter that she had written to me. It was a card or something. I found it in my study room when I'm downsizing, and I found it, and I just sat and read, and I thought, "Oh, is this ever sweet." She gave me a card, and every page, she wrote a note to me about me growing up under her. I called her Mama Jackson. I can't even think what Mama Jackson's first name was, because that's all we called her, her and Aunt Essie. Aunt Essie and Mama Jackson, they were pillars for me. I don't know, I wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for them, probably, in my life.

And Harry Ballard, he was another one that took me to church Sunday school every morning. I could count on Mr. Ballard, who ended up being a deacon of the church. Deacon Harry. He's seen that I got to Sunday school and church, and he ended up being our choir director in the choir. But yeah, so music is just part of my soul. Part of my soul. When I can't sing it, I can hum it, I can think it and I enjoy all kinds of music. When I was in high school, I was in the choir for four years, and I used to watch the choir director where she was directing us. And I thought, "I want to do that. I want to do that." And so, that encouraged me to want to be a choir director. So I did. When I got older, I ended up being a choir director. Never had a lesson of directing nothing but just watching and it's in my soul.

KH: And it seems like music just allows you a different way to communicate than speaking or reading.

[00:22:00]

FC: Exactly. Yeah. Because I was a bashful little girl. I was tongue tied, couldn't talk straight, couldn't pronounce my syllables. They laughed at me, made fun of me. And so yeah, when I grew up, I didn't have to talk. I could just move my arms.

KH: So when you are growing up in the Rondo community, I mean, you're describing such a nice community, like really what community means. It's not just a geographic area. It is this connection.

FC: Looking after each other.

KH: Yeah. Was it primarily African American?

FC: Yes. Pretty much, yeah.

KH: And so, when you were at Ober Boys Club, that's further east in the Rondo community versus Oxford.

FC: And everybody in the community, anybody that wanted to come.

KH: And Ober Boys Club was run by the Union Gospel Mission, is that right?

FC: Yes. Still is. And it's still there. Our church has a food shelf, it's called Nourish. Our ex-pastor's wife runs it.

KH: Am I right in, I mean, I've looked at the maps, I think I've been to the Ober Boys Club site. That is north of where the freeway now is, right? Like just north, just on the edge?

FC: Yes, just north on the edge, yeah, right there. When you get off of that Marion, there it is.

KH: And where was the Hollow? Also north?

FC: The Hollow was on St. Anthony and, what is that cross street? It's between Arundel and the next street up. Because we used to slide down the Arundel Hill and the Hollow, but it was further north. It was like maybe two blocks north. The old Hallie Q.

Brown used to sit where the Hollow was. That was where the first Hallie Q. Brown was built, in the Hollow.

[00:24:00]

KH: Right in that?

FC: Right at the Hollow, yeah. Because I remember the Hollow and then all the taverns, and then there was 94 Rondo. So I guess maybe about two blocks off of 94.

KH: And were you involved at Hallie at that time?

FC: Not really. We went to Hallie once in a while when they had events and stuff. But no, we weren't really involved, just going down there to that Hollow and being part of that.

KH: And so, how did you first get involved at Oxford, which is further west? It's kind of on the western end.

FC: We moved down to that end. We moved to 925. Well, first we were a half a block from Oxford. I'm trying to think of that address. We were about a half a block. Was that 925? And then we moved around the corner to 925, so that would have been 986 Carroll we lived at. So we could walk down there anytime anything was happening, picnics or the music, whatever, right out of our door. Then we took our kids down there. We took our children down there. Then I ice skated, even before the kids. I went ice skating down there with Bill. Bill was down there in the wintertime mostly.

[00:26:00]

KH: So, was this after high school, after you graduated?

FC: No, it was before. Before I graduated because I had to cheerlead on skates. That was horrible. I was a cheerleader. My ankles were just as weak then as they were when I first started down at Oxford ice skating. But that's where I got my ice skating beginning, was at Oxford. We'd get cold, we'd go in and they had a stove, fire, some kind

of thing where we could go inside of Oxford, in a little hut. We'd warm up and then we'd go back out again. And we'd come in, we'd warm up, and we'd go back out again until it was time to go home or do our duties. But basically, that's where we hung out. That was our hangout, Oxford playground.

KH: At that time, the time that you're describing now, it was just that little warming house thing?

FC: The warming house, that's a good name for it. Yeah. I think it was wood. Yeah, it was an old time warming house.

KH: I'm just trying to think about the evolution of Oxford. Is it after that, not the building that is there now, but there was a different building, almost like a trailer or was that the warming house?

FC: It was built up, but I don't remember what it looked like. I guess that warming house just sticks in my mind.

KH: So how big was it, if you had to guess?

FC: The warming house?

KH: Yeah.

FC: I'd say maybe about the size of this living room.

[00:28:00]

KH: So if you think back to those years when you were learning to skate and hanging out at Oxford, set the scene for me. What did it look like on a winter's day when you were down there skating?

FC: Oh, a winter day like what we're having today, or like we had last night was awesome. It was exciting. Let it snow. Kids all over. The warming house and the music and we're going in, going out, just playing with each other, playing in the snow, making the angels and snow bunnies. We just hung out. And it was outside. It wasn't like today

these kids are on their phones playing games. Our games were, oh no, outside. No inside. There's too much outside for you to do. Go outside and play. We weren't allowed to sit in the house and play games.

Our game was outside with each other. It taught us camaraderie. It taught us how to be a community, how to be united with each other, how to have fun and not fight. We didn't fight. We did not have fights and craziness out there. Everybody just enjoyed themselves. Bill didn't have to run outside and break up fights and all that. They don't even skate today, but it was just a fun time.

[00:30:00]

FC: I guess that's why we enjoyed Bill so much, too, because he didn't have to chastise us. We just were a different brood of kids growing up where it was all about fun and getting together and getting out of the house, in case mama had some chores, getting out of the house. And Bill was our supervisor and our parents trusted us with Bill. Today, they can't trust kids with these coordinators, or whatever they call them now. The parents have to sit right there. But that didn't happen. We just put our skates on our shoulders and ran down to Oxford and stayed down there until we got ready to come home.

KH: You're talking about a really harmonious environment among all of you kids down there. Do you think that was a function of just you and your friends and who was there? Was it a function of the environment that Bill established? Like, was it part of just the Rondo experience?

FC: It was part of the Rondo community and those of us who were there. And like I say, Bill was such a big part of it, because if he had not been the coordinator that he was and the person that he was, to love us and take care of us and keep us safe, we would not have been able to congregate down at the Oxford playground. So I have to give him a lot of credit for that. We didn't realize it then, but like you say, raising up now and looking

back, how important that Bill was in our life.

[00:32:00]

FC: He needs to be able to recollect all this and hear this, because you don't realize that people like him have stayed steady, been steady still in the community, still loving us with what he got left. He needs to know how valuable he was to us in our community. I have a picture of me and him and my sister Wilma that went down to the new Oxford. My sister had dementia. She just passed not too long ago. And she always talked about Bill, Bill, Bill. She was crazy about Bill. And I said, "Well, come one day, we're going to go see Bill."

I told him, "Bill, we're going to come and see you, so be ready, because she's got a little dementia and so she might not remember you." So we went down there and she remembered. She remembered Bill and he was so happy to see her. And we took a picture. He said, "Well, let's take a picture, Flo," and I'm glad he did. So we had a community picture down at the new Oxford.

KH: So did you and your sister, and/or your sister, for that matter, play other sports at Oxford? You've talked about skating down there a lot.

FC: Skating was my big thing. I didn't do any other sport that I can recall at Oxford because we started our kids down there. They're the ones that we're saying, my husband got into football. None of my kids were really into basketball. They didn't do a lot of basketball down there. Mostly baseball and football were the things for our kids.

[00:34:00]

KH: The reason I ask about sports for you and your sister is because you were just describing how important Bill was to both of you. I think some people who know Bill, or know his name anyway, think of him as primarily a coach. But I mean, he taught you how to skate, which is not a small thing. But in what other ways was Bill influential for you

two outside of coaching?

FC: Bill would come to our events. If we were in any events at school, or whatever in the community. Not only me and my sister, but any of the kids down at Oxford. If he knew that they were in any sports, he supported us. It would be, “Oh, hey, Bill. There’s Bill up in the audience.” Stacy was one of our famous Central High School football people, and Bill followed him through his career because Stacy ended up being a national football player. And Oxford is named after him. Stacy Robinson Field. Bill was a big character in his life. Hanging onto him, following him through. You don’t find too many people that follow their kids that grew up under them through high school.

KH: Once they leave?

FC: Yeah, once they leave the playground, that’s it.

KH: And so, it sounds like, from what you’re describing, Bill was invested in all of you as people.

FC: Definitely invested in people. Not just his job, but his people at his job, you know?

[00:36:00]

KH: And not just those athletes. I mean, athletes, yes. We all know about Dave Winfield and Steve Winfield and Paul Molitor and Stacy Robinson. But all the rest of you, people who didn’t go on to professional sports.

FC: Oh yeah. See you in the store, anywhere. It wasn’t one of those, “Oh, here’s some of my kids from the playground. I better pretend like I don’t see them.” No, not Bill. Oh, he’d just come at you with open arms and he always had open arms. And he does to this day. To this day, he has open arms. My brother went down to Oxford. My brother grew up playing football down at Oxford. He’s older now. He’s 86 now. And Bill has followed him. “Where’s Steamboat?” His name was Steamboat. That was his football

name and basketball name. "Where's Steamboat? I want to see Steamboat."

He and Steve made a point to go with me to see my brother, who is in a rehab center. And he made it a point. Didn't stop. Didn't stop calling me to make sure that they got to see Steamboat. That's a community that goes way, way, way, way back. Steve and Bill are the only two people that my brother remembers because he has dementia now. So that's the impact that Bill and the Oxford playground had on my brother's life.

KH: So you obviously have talked a lot about Bill and Steve Winfield. Who else was at Oxford when you were there, whether it was your peers or adults?

[00:38:00]

FC: My husband gave me three names. I asked him for three names. One guy's name was Bill, but I can't remember his last name. I should have asked him to write that down. But I can put a line, and I can give it to the three people that all worked with my husband, with football, with the kids. They all worked with our children and grandchildren on that football field. Now, like I say, at Oxford, it was more football. The basketball team was Central High School. And it trickled, always trickled over to Oxford. But the big thing was basketball at Central High School. But, yeah, there were three of them that worked real tight with Bill and Dave and all of our children.

KH: When did you get married?

FC: When did I get married? December 26, 1959.

KH: So it was before you graduated?

FC: I've got an anniversary coming up. Yes, a few months before.

KH: It was a few months before you graduated that you got married, and you just told me this. Your first son was born in '60?

FC: Yeah.

KH: And then what about your other two boys? When were they born?

FC: One is November 19 and one is November 15, and they were back to back.

So, what year did Kennedy get killed?

KH: In '63.

FC: Okay, so one was '63 and the other one was '62, I think.

[00:40:00]

KH: So, yeah, your boys were close in age.

FC: Yeah, they were right behind each other, a year apart. Nine months apart, whatever.

KH: You mentioned Kennedy, so I want to kind of expand our view of what we're talking about here and ask you about the context that surrounded you and all the people you were hanging out at Oxford with. And, of course, one of the big contexts that affected Rondo was the freeway coming through. So you must remember that because you graduated—

FC: Yeah, that was devastating. They took everything that we knew, all of our heritage. They just tracted it right down, took it away from us. The only place, a monument, that's left now is the Ober Boys Club. Everything else was torn down. I mean, I remember living on Carroll, going down that Arundel Hill. The ambulance was there, Reverend Gardner's church was there, the stores across the street. I mean, it's vivid in my mind what everything looked like, where everything was. But they took all that.

The Marshall school I went to, where the kids beat me up after school. They took all of that. They took it and then placed it into the Jewish community, the Marshall. All the Rondo street where we had Mr. Field's drugstore. There were a couple of bars on that corner. Then down at the playground, they took that out.

KH: The Hollow?

[00:42:00]

FC: The Hollow, yeah. All of that. Mr. Brooks's Funeral Home sat up on the hill. All of that. They just devastated it and pushed us out.

KH: Your family, either your mom or your own, did you lose property, houses to that construction?

FC: Yeah, we had to relocate. My dad lived at 450 Carroll. We didn't live there with him. We visited him, but we didn't live with him. We lived at 388 Carroll, 430 Carroll. And so, we had to relocate. There's apartments there now. You've got apartment buildings, and I don't remember what that one building is, and then the school, that Black art school that they built. And then Hallie is behind it.

KH: So you had to relocate because of the freeway and all that stuff that was coming through?

FC: Oh yeah. And I don't remember where we relocated. Well, we went further west. That's when we ended up at 388 Carroll. Because we moved from one end of the block to the other end of the block to a block and a half away, to 986 Marshall. So, 388 to 430, 986 Marshall. Those were the three. Just further, further, and further out.

KH: But also closer to Oxford, as you're moving.

FC: Definitely closer to Oxford. Yeah.

KH: Now, did your family or mom own homes or renting?

FC: No, everything was rented.

[00:44:00]

KH: So, 1960, you graduate from high school, you're getting married, you have a child, so you're busy with your life.

FC: I was really active in school, too.

KH: What did you do in school?

FC: Oh, I was in the choir. I was in GAA. I was a representative of the choir. I was

a school representative. Flag girl. My sports were part of GAA, Girls Athletic Association. I did play basketball. I played basketball. I was a guard. But the choir was my big thing. That and cheerleading. Those are my two tops.

KH: And did you cheer off the ice as well?

FC: Oh, yeah, all year round. At all the different schools and whatever. I lived a really full, lustrous life in high school. I made sure of that. I loved school. So I made sure of that. My mom made sure I got whatever I needed to be in whatever sports and stuff, things that I was in.

KH: Did you like the academic part of school? Like the classes?

FC: Oh yeah. I didn't like English and Math, and those were the two most important classes of education now, I see. But, yeah, I wasn't good at Math. I struggled with Math. We didn't have tutors at that time, so you did the best you could with what you had.

[00:46:00]

KH: So you were in high school then, and then newly married as all the planning for the freeway is coming through. Do you remember, was the community, whether yourself or your family or your friends, were they protesting? Were they expressing their concern about what was happening with the freeway?

FC: There was protesting. I didn't do a lot of it, but my village sister, she'd get her signs and go out there in a minute and protest. Yeah, she protested anything right to almost the time she died. That's just the kind of person she was. I was just the opposite of that. Stay home and keep your mouth shut. We come from two different families, so she was raised differently than I was.

KH: Whether or not you were protesting or doing anything public like that, was the freeway a topic of conversation with you at home, whether again, with your mom and

siblings or your husband, were you talking about it? How big a deal was it in your life?

FC: The freeway? It was a big deal because you lost a lot of your friends, you lost your culture, the places that you used to go to or attend, the stores that we used to have. The community stores weren't there any longer. I'm trying to think. Well, the Ober Boys Club was the only thing we had left in the community. The schools, we were pushed further out to go to the schools and stuff. So it was devastating. It was devastating to think how they did it. And, of course, if you don't have the rights or you don't know what to do and your protesting didn't mean nothing.

[00:48:00]

FC: The churches weren't really that involved as, now as I think about it, that they should have been. But yeah, so it was like making a whole new community all over again. You're only seeing people from the community once in a while. You know when we see each other now? At funerals. And I said, "We've got to stop meeting like this."

A guy in the community, Herman [Lewis], tries to keep the community together by having every Friday get togethers down at this hotel down by where Sears used to be. There's a hotel there. And he tries to keep the community together. Then they have a Rondo club that people have joined, and they do the Rondo Day. We used to have the Rondo day parades and stuff. So, a lot of those that are on your list organize the Rondo Days so that we can get together as a community and, Hey, how you doing? Who's living, who ain't living?

And that's once a year, we really get together like that, too, to just get reacquainted and where everybody's at and how they're doing. Yeah, it's really sad the way they just distributed us out, but you think about history. In the older days, they did the same thing to the Jews and the Gentiles. Everybody got moved all over everywhere. And that's the way it is now. People had to move out to the suburbs. Where are you living now? Oh, I live out

in Maplewood.

[00:50:00]

FC: And we ended up, because of breaking in homes and stuff like that, moving out from 925 Marshall way out to Abell and Larpenteur in Roseville. It's kind of a cross between Roseville and Maplewood. But my dad had some property out there. So he gave us property and we built a home out there. When we couldn't find one to buy we wanted, we ended up building one, but far away from the community.

KH: And about what year did you move out there?

FC: Well, we've been here 10 years. We were in our home for maybe about 20 some years. So about 30 years ago. We were young when we did it, but it's like we had the land, so we got the loan, and so we just did it. That's where we finished raising up our kids.

KH: So they all graduated high school from out there?

FC: One of them graduated in Roseville. And I'm trying to think of the name of the high school that he went to. The other two graduates, we made sure they went back to Central, because it was so devastating for them to be moved from all their friends. So we would have to drive them. My husband would have to drive them every morning into Central High School. So both Brian and David, they graduated from Central, but Richard ended up at [Kellogg High School], as they call it, the white school, which he hated. I don't know why, I probably made that decision because there was so much going on at Central then.

[00:52:00]

KH: Is Richard your oldest?

FC: Richard's the baby.

KH: He's the youngest. So the two older boys then graduated from Central?

FC: Graduated from Central High, yes.

KH: So I want to back up a little bit now that we're talking about your kids.

You've mentioned it and kind of alluded to it but you said they played football mostly at Oxford and your husband coached. What else did they do? How big a presence in their lives was Oxford?

FC: Oxford was, I would say, 75 percent in their life, Oxford and Central High. Because even though they went to Central, they always went back to where Bill was, you know?

KH: So they are attached to Bill as well.

FC: Oh yeah.. They all know Bill.

KH: And whether you or your kids even, for that matter, did you do things at Oxford besides the sports? I know they had an arts and crafts teacher.

FC: Now you mean?

KH: When you were young or when your kids were young?

FC: Just skating is the main thing that I did.

KH: Did you know Pat, what's her name? Pat Gausted, G-A-U-S-T-E-D?

FC: The name's not familiar.

KH: I think she was like an arts and crafts person at Oxford.

FC: Now, if you would ask me about Ona [ph] down at the Ober Boys Club. She was arts and crafts. Pat. I'm sure I knew Pat. Now that you mention it, the name sounds familiar, but I don't remember doing a lot of that kind of stuff at Oxford.

[00:54:00]

KH: And did they have, you were talking about at Ober Boys, I think, there being Halloween parties and other kinds of just social events?

FC: They had activities, yeah.

KH: At Oxford?

FC: Yeah, I would go to the activities, especially Halloween parties. Between the Ober Boys and Oxford, they kind of would run over sometime in their programming. But yeah.

KH: So, again, I mean, Oxford was, I think at the time, or at least at various times in its existence, it's been called a recreation center. Now it's a community center. And that maybe in more ways kind of captures what it was.

FC: That was really bad too, because when they built this new section and all this to Oxford, they took it from Bill and gave it to somebody else. After all those years that he struggled with bringing and grooming up them kids and making the Oxford name, the community name, what it represented, they took it.

KH: The city did. The Parks and Rec Department.

FC: Yeah. Parks and Rec. They took it. I knew it had to be heartbreaking for them, but at least they went down a little bit more west. They named a playground after Bill down there. He should have had his name on that Oxford. They put Stacy on there, because Stacy was Black, but Bill's name should have been the name on Oxford. Stacy grew up there under Bill, but because Stacy was a celebrity, a well known football player. We didn't like that, but that was the politics. That was nothing but politics.

[00:56:00]

FC: And, of course, like you're interviewing me now. I guess if we could interview Bill like this, us kids that grew up with him, a lot of feelings would come out of Bill of how he was treated because he was white.

KH: Treated by other people in the community?

FC: Some of the people in the community didn't even do him right. Again, I think it was politics. Me and my sister used to talk about that, how dirty it was that Bill didn't

get full recognition for all that he had done for all the kids in the Oxford community. And you know when he'll get it? When he dies. And that's sad.

KH: Yeah. Well, I think this might be part of it because everybody has spoken about Bill. Everybody.

FC: People need their flowers while they're living, so that they know that they were such a big impact. Like I say now, with his dementia, you don't know how much. But I'm sure there's some of it he would enjoy.

KH: Yeah. Oh yeah. So do you mean that when they added on and it became Jimmy Lee, that's when Bill was let go, or it was even earlier than that?

FC: What? The name down at the other playground?

KH: Yeah, so now it's like the Oxford Community Center and the Jimmy Lee Recreation Center. It's all that same big building with the gyms and the pools.

[00:58:00]

FC: They're one, yeah. If I recollect, I think Jimmy Lee was a police officer. Not for sure. You can't quote me on that one. But they named it the Jimmy Lee Oxford playground. Something like that.

KH: And that was after Bill was gone?

FC: I guess, yeah. So somebody was kind enough to at least name, there's a playground next to Central High School. It's hooked on to their badminton field. It's got his name, which I was really surprised when I first saw it.

KH: It's a baseball field, right?

FC: Yeah, it's a little baseball field.

KH: Yeah, because you can see it on the outfield fence.

FC: They did an extension. So that was their way of appeasing. But no, it wasn't right.

KH: And when you say it was all politics, what do you mean?

FC: I'm thinking it was politics because Bill had been there all of his life. He deserved it. He owned it. He deserved to have his name after Oxford.

KH: Why do you think he didn't get it?

FC: It had to be downtown. The St. Paul district runs that place, and owns it. Parks and Recreation. So that's why I said it had to be politics. And I'm not into politics. I don't deal with all that stuff. But at the same time, you know when things aren't done decently and in order.

KH: Yeah, it's too bad.

FC: Again, the culture thing, the race thing, the color thing. If Bill would have been Black, Bill's name would have been all over that playground. And the kids know it. We know it that grew up. We know whose name should have been on there. Love Stacy to death, but it wasn't Stacy that brought up all of our kids in the community. He was one of them. He didn't bring anybody up.

[01:00:00]

FC: He was one of our little heroes that grew up down Oxford, that came out of Oxford and Central High and made something of himself and then died at an early age. But no, it was Bill.

KH: And you said, one other person at least has mentioned this, something about even some members of the Rondo community not necessarily, at least at first, welcoming Bill into that setting. Do you remember that? That would have been when you were still in high school.

FC: Yeah, I was younger and didn't pay attention to all that politics. But as we got older you hear all the vibes and the things. And you see. We'd seen when we got older and actually not even going to Oxford anymore, how the dynamics of Oxford started just

changing. Different people in charge and people that had no business being down there, didn't care nothing about the kids, were now running the playground and things like this. We thought, That ain't nothing but the city of St. Paul running this. It's not our playground anymore.

KH: Yeah. I mean, because you were here at your house on Lexington. So you lived just, I don't know, a mile south of it, maybe.

FC: I can walk over there. Yeah.

KH: Are you ever down there? Do you ever go to Oxford Jimmy Lee?

[01:02:00]

FC: I go to the new one. Sometimes I do aerobic classes down there. I haven't been in the pool. I'm trying to think, oh, I was walking the track. I did take a \$25 membership out in the winter so that I could walk the track. And then I joined LA Fitness. But that was nice to be able to walk the track.

KH: So, you've been there in the post Oxford as you knew it, post Bill era.

FC: Yeah. As a matter of fact, Bill took us on a tour down at the new Oxford because I said, "Bill, I've never even been in this new Oxford." He said, "You haven't?" So he said, "When you're coming down with Wilma, I'll take you on a tour." And he did. He told us this used to be this, this used to be the warming house, and this used to be this. So he could tell you every board that's in there, what used to be there. Very proud to do it. So proud.

KH: So it's about 11:05 right now, so we have a few minutes left as long as it's still okay with you and your schedule. So going to circle back to you, so you graduate in 1960. You're married; you have kids in pretty close succession. Am I correct in understanding or hearing that you at one point or for a while were an LPN? Did you nurse?

FC: Yes, 28 years.

KH: So more than just a time. For 28 years, you worked as a nurse?

FC: Twenty-eight years. I went to St. Mary's in between there. I got an AA at, was it Metropolitan Community College? I got that in business. And then I went to St. Mary's over in Minneapolis for RN, but I didn't go back for the last quarter. I couldn't afford it. So from there I decided to take LPN and get some kind of nursing for all that money I had spent.

[01:04:00]

KH: So you started the RN first and then decided to do the LPN. And where did you work with your nursing?

FC: I worked at Charles T. Miller Hospital, which is no more. It's torn down for the freeway. And then I worked at the United Hospital. And because I went to Bethesda for chaplaincy school, I got my degree in chaplaincy, I worked at all the HealthEast hospitals.. He's coming in. He can give us those names for the three people. Good, I needed you. The three names you gave me that I forgot.

David Conover: Bill Carter, and Dusty [Horten], I don't know Dusty's last name.

FC: And Scottie [Howell]?

DC: And Scott. I don't know their last name.

FC: Scottie, we called him.

DC: Scottie's up at Central High School coaching, now.

KH: Oh, he's now coaching. Okay.

FC: And there was another Bill [Carter], but I don't know that other Bill's last name. There were two Bills there.

DC: Let's see. Well, she knows Bill Peterson. Carter. There was a white guy, used to work with the football players, too, [such as Benny Christian]. I forget his name.

FC: Bill Carter. That's what Bill's last name was, Carter. And Scottie.

KH: Okay, got you. So we were talking about your nursing career, HealthEast.

[01:06:00]

FC: I went to the Metropolitan for my AA. I went to Bethesda Rehabilitation Chaplaincy School. It was in the hospital, in the Bethesda Hospital, which is no more. So I went there for about a year and a half there to get my chaplaincy. St. Joseph Hospital. I worked at St. Joseph.

KH: Okay, so you did a lot of years of nursing?

FC: Well, after I got my theology degree at—shoot, I should never forget all that money I spent there.

KH: I bet I have it in my notes. Bethel Seminary.

FC: Bethel, thank you. They've renamed it now.

KH: So once you did that, did you leave nursing?

FC: When I got out of Bethel, then I went into the chaplaincy. I did all my nursing before. That was all before. God made sure of that, so I'd be ready for everything else.

KH: And so, how long have you been doing chaplaincy?

FC: Chaplaincy, I worked at the Ramsey County Correctional Facility. I did that for about 17, 18 years. And that's volunteer work. I volunteered. I only had one job-job that I got paid for as a chaplain, and that was a nursing home that they've closed down now. It was an older nursing home on the south side of Selby.

[01:08:00]

KH: So do you see any connection between your experiences at Oxford and what you did with your life later, whether it was nursing or chaplaincy?

FC: You know, just learning and knowing how to work with people and respect others and coordinating. I think just the respect and the love for other people, no matter

who they were, no matter the culture or the race. I think that upbringing at Oxford had so much to do with that, because everybody was invited at Oxford. Even though it was in the Black community, it wasn't just a Black playground. It was open to anybody that wanted to come. Bill made sure of that. He didn't show any differences.

KH: So there were white kids and kids of other backgrounds?

FC: Oh yeah. Anybody who wanted to come.

KH: Was the same thing true at Ober Boys Club or at Hallie?

FC: Oh, yeah. Ober Boys Club, too. But because it was in our community, we took advantage of it. But no, all of our directors, coordinators, everybody that worked for Ober Club were white. Harold Moore. Oh, we idolized him like we did Bill. And Ona, she was our crafts. I don't know, I think there's one more. I can't think of his name, but I think he might still work at the Gospel Mission with the men. But, yeah, they were all our rocks. They were our rocks.

[01:10:00]

KH: So you said when we started talking and we were talking about you having been born in Duluth and in Superior for a while, that you, I forget how you put it, but it was something about race, color just didn't matter to you.

FC: No. And you know what? I just grew up like that. Everything that I was in or everywhere I went was all white. I was usually always the only Black. Because I participated in everything. I didn't look at myself as a, Oh, you're a Black person. You can't belong to that, or you can't do this or that. I didn't do that. And that's just how I grew up. And that's how I raised my kids. It doesn't matter if you're the only one. You go and you do what you're supposed to do and get what you're supposed to get and don't let nobody stop you.

KH: Along the way, while you were doing that, did you feel any racial hostility

from the white peers, kids, whatever, around you?

FC: Yeah. Oh yeah. You could hear them jibber jabbering, talking, making fun, making little cracks, but I didn't let it bother me. And if I cried, I'd cry to myself. They'd never seen me cry because I was tough. I was born to be tough. If you're hurting my feelings, you're not going to know it.

KH: What was the racial composition of Mechanic Arts?

[01:12:00]

FC: It was great, but a lot of the coaches were prejudiced. My brother went with a white girl. She had a baby with him, and they separated him from the school. The coach's son liked her, so somehow he had her move to another school to get her away from my brother. And that's been a scar on my brother all his life. I still don't know who the baby is. Never met my niece. I would love to meet her. I do not know who she is. She should be in her seventies. Never met her. Now that, that right there.

But the principal, Mr. Simmers, Charles T. Simmers, he was the greatest man. He didn't tolerate it. If he knew about it, he wouldn't tolerate it.

KH: And he was white?

FC: Oh yeah. He would go and he'd visit my brother and check on him, see how he's doing. And he'd say, "If you have any trouble here while I'm principal, come and see me." Yeah, he was a great man. But, hey, I just moved right along. I just moved right along. My whole four years were wonderful.

KH: Good. Great. Well, I'm just going to take a quick look at my notes to see if I'm forgetting anything. Is there anything else that you want to add about Oxford?

FC: Not right offhand. You have brought up some really good memories that I had forgotten all about, so this has been a good interview. I enjoyed this.

KH: Good. So last question then. If you had to explain why it's important for a

community to have a place like Oxford, how would you explain that?

[01:14:00]

FC: How would I explain that?

KH: Why was Oxford important?

FC: I was going to say I would talk about the importance that it meant now and when we were raising up, to have a safe place, a safe environment to go to, to have the importance of having people who care about you, truly care about you, who look after you, who not only look after you, but follow you through your life's adventures and recognize you that they're there. They want you to know their presence is there with you. Those are important things that our children don't have now. They just don't have it.

Like I said, I don't know what the Ober Boys Club does now. I don't know what they got in there as far as for the community other than letting the food shelf be in there. It's more the adults now. The kids are kind of left on the streets to fend for themselves. I think that's another reason why there's so much crime, because we don't have a place. Even the Martin Luther King Center, I don't know what they're doing for kids. They have the Penumbra Theatre, but you have to be older to be in that. I don't really have a buy-in in the King Center. I used to work there.

[01:16:00]

FC: I worked at the Model City Health Clinic there. They have people inside of their facilities. But what the individual facility is doing now for the youth as a community, I don't know. They have a young person that runs it now, too, so that might be a good person to talk to find out, what are you guys doing for these kids? I'm getting too old now. I always say I've done what I could do for kids. And me and my husband have worked with kids all our life, in the community, in the church. Did a lot, a lot, a lot of things with them. But I don't see anybody taking the time out of their life to do that. And that's

because I had people like Bill, my village moms, who took time with me when I was growing up to invest in me.

And that's what we need to do. We need to invest in our young people because they're going out of this world backwards. They're going down to the jail, into the prison. That's what I've seen when I'm a chaplain at the jail. I did one-on-ones with the women. It was so sad. And the men, too, sad, the environment and the life that they grew up in. I didn't grow up in the kind of life that they're growing up now. That's why I could do that work because I could feel their pain of what they've had to grow up in.

I was blessed. Even with a stepfather, I was still blessed because I was out there in that community with people who cared and watched over me. So we need more community. They've distributed us all over, so we don't have that. So this is going to be great because I hope that this will help bring the community back into focus and younger people to see they need to step up to the plate and bring it back. Was it Bob White?

[01:18:00]

KH: Frank.

FC: Frank White, and myself, and Stevie, Bill, we're all older now. We put in our time, but we can give them some ideas. But, yeah, we need to bring community back.

KH: Well, I think that's a really good note to end on, both kind of a call to action, as well as a hope for the future, and a challenge. I appreciate your time so much. This was really interesting.

FC: Well, thank you, Ms. Kim. We finally got together.

KH: Yes, yes. Even in the snow. Okay, I'll just shut that off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]